Workplace Series 2021 - Part 2 Creating A Safe Environment For Ideas

Welcome back, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn, this is Inside Exec. We are up to number two, session two of our workplace series for 2021.

Today we're going to talk about how you create an environment where people contribute freely and feel safe doing so. Now I know that we partially covered that in part one and that will be the case with all of these topics that we're talking this series, they're going to overlap. That's why we decided to make it a series in the first place.

We've talked about that initial recruitment phase and then getting people in initially and making them feel valued from day one. Today we're going to focus more on that environment, that working environment and how you encourage people to contribute freely regardless of how long they've been with the organization and then how do they feel safe doing so, how do you know that they feel safe about that activity?

And I will stress that we're talking about people who have been in the organization for any length of time because in my experience, those that have been there longer often become more and more reticent about suggesting anything because they're feeling like they've moved beyond the point where they are the driving force in the team or an organization and they're just there because they've got the historical knowledge and they know how the systems work.
So people come to them as a reference, I guess, rather than

as an innovator.

So we want to look at all of your team members and how you encourage them to contribute and how you can make sure that they feel safe about their contribution. And that's probably the area that I'm more interested in, because I do see that organizations struggle with that, struggle to make people feel safe.

Making someone feel safe covers so many aspects. So if we're talking about, what if I have a personal problem and I want to be able to share it because it might affect my work, but it might not, and I don't want to be judged. It might be a mental health issue, it might be that I just feel or noticed something and I want to do something about it, it could be positive or not positive. Can I do that without someone judging, misreading my motives and all of that? And I think that can only happen if it's done consistently.

So from the CEO to the whole organization saying it's okay. For example, even if I make a mistake and a big one, how do I tackle that? What I used to say, because that's what some good leaders taught me, is if you make a mistake, the bigger it is the faster you come and tell me about it. Because it's not just your mistake. It is a mistake, it might be all yours, it might not be, doesn't matter about that. The point is how can we fix it and make sure it doesn't happen again. The emphasis is on we, it's not you made a mistake.

So I think to make it safe to do so is still, first articulate it. Now articulating that that's how you manage. That's one thing, and that should be anybody in a leadership role, whether its

supervisory or CEO then the proof is in the pudding, isn't it? Because you say that, but how do you actually act when somebody comes and does that? Do you lose it? Do you judge? What do you do? How is it interpreted?

So to your point if somebody has been there a long time, they might be even cynical, oh yes, they all say that, but you know what happened to Mary Jane and Tom Jones and so on and so forth and they end up getting the sack, blah, blah blah. I think this is then when the onus is to prove that that's not gonna happen here. It's going to be just like we say, okay, but repetitive mistakes and deliberate and non caring, they get handled differently. That's one example.

Another example, if somebody comes in and says they've got to feel safe to even say something to someone no matter what position they're in and that safe is not just I've noticed something but there was something in the zoom session and somebody felt really uncomfortable in whatever and I've noticed something. Is it appropriate for me to check that? Or should I just pretend I haven't seen it? Is it my job to say, no matter what rank? I am in the room and we haven't heard from so and so. Is that putting them on the spot and making them feel embarrassed? Is that including them?

And we talked about that before but by absolutely behaving in a manner and I have to put a bit of responsibility on the leaders because people will look to us for guidance or help, we act.

But then as colleagues it is also important. So if somebody comes up with an idea, another person shouldn't put them

down or after the meeting, say oh you're trying to impress or whatever. It's action. It's the action in how we actually treat people and stand by what we say are our values in relation to make it safe for people to come and tell us things that might be sensitive to them. They might be private to them, they might be about the organization, they might be about something they heard or read and they want to clarify, they might be concerned about.

So for example, I just have a topical thing, is I heard that my organization is going to force all of us to come back to work and not work from home. If that was the case and everybody's talking about it, but nobody is addressing it then as an organization, we should make it safe for anyone to ring their manager or to ring the CEO even and to say look this is what's going around. Are you able to give us a bit of clarity?

I think it comes back to congruence as a leader. We have to ensure that all of our actions are congruent with what we are saying, our beliefs are and the easiest way for you to do that is to feel comfortable about what you're doing. So if you say to people my door is always open and inadvertently three days out of five, you close the door, well, that's not congruent with what you've said. Even if you're doing it unthinkingly, you're thinking you're at home instead of in the office, whatever it is, you have to be mindful of everything you're doing.

That particular example I use because I went as a consultant to manage a particularly troublesome center In outer Sydney in the late 90s. And I said to them, I came in and I said I will always work with an open door unless I'm in a situation that requires privacy because I'm talking to an employee and then

the door will be closed. Now, sometimes it was really uncomfortable for me to have the door open because the rest of the office was open and it was noisy and distracting. I didn't want to change their work environment in that sense, but it was important for them to see that the door was always open and when it was closed, there was someone in the office with me and it was never closed unless there was someone else in the office.

After about two weeks when I talked to all of them individually, one of the biggest problem children that was there, she was twice my age, but she was still a juvenile behavior wise, came and she said, you're so different from any other manager we've had. We judged you, thought you were going to be this and that and you're not. Well, that's good. Because this is what your thing is - who I am. This is how I'm going to manage you. And some days you won't like it. But some days it'll work in your favour.

To me that's taking a stand, knowing who you are and being comfortable with who you are as a manager, and this is how I'm going to manage this group regardless of who they are, sends a message out to start with. That is a killer for them to work around so they can say, well, this is, this is set in stone. This is what it's going to be. This is how she is as a manager. What do we need to do to get what we want out of the situation or to make things change?

What I found with that was that they did come to me with ideas. I would never judge it on face value. I would look at it and say, okay, I think it needs more work. You go away and come back in a week's time and you're going to present it to

the rest of the staff. I'm not going to make the decision on it on my own. Everyone's going to be involved because everyone needs to know that this is the way you're thinking about the work that you're doing.

That places some responsibility on them. Not only to flesh out the idea that they had but knowing that they had to present it to their peers meant that they had to be really sure that it was a good idea for everyone. That it wasn't just going to make their job easier. That it was going to work for the team because they all did very different things and didn't really work together. They didn't need to interact with one another particularly, but by making them do that with the rest of the team it reminded them that they were part of a team and that I wasn't going to make a decision until the rest of the team had had a chance to think about it. Ultimately the decision was mine. But I wasn't going to make a decision unless everyone else had heard the information as well.

And that stopped the B. S. from spreading. It made the environment more cohesive. I won't say that it was ever really cohesive but they did all know that everyone else in the room had an important job to do and that wasn't the case when I started there. They all had been jockeying for positions and I've got this grant and you do that and you just only work two days a week and all of that was happening, there was no team there. And by the end of when I was there, they understood that they were working as part of a team environment. They weren't a working team because they didn't need to be in that sense, but there was a much greater level of respect for one another's work. And they had got used to that idea of sitting around the table talking about their ideas and often it

happened in the tea room. It didn't happen at the formal meetings that we had once a fortnight, but I didn't care where it happened because it was all about making the environment better and making it more safe for them to feel like they could say things or do things or suggest changes because they were talking more to one another.

In making it safe when somebody comes to share with you like these examples, we discussed this, I know that but we gave it a go. I'm really concerned that we're doing the wrong thing and I find it personally this that and the other okay, so when somebody comes to you with that again, this listening, not patronizing and also not making them feel like you are high maintenance and you're never happy.

I think if you can't give an honest answer and in some cases not agree with them, just like you said, I need to think about the whole team, articulate it and that's really important or saying, look, I think we're gonna have to agree to disagree on this. Even if they go to that to say look from where I'm sitting, looking at it this way we want to go ahead. Thank you for taking the time. I know it's really hard and it must be frustrating because you sincerely believe we're doing the wrong thing. I believe we're doing it right for now and let's go and keep working together. Encourage that person not make them feel like you're wrong now and that's what I'm going to do. It's the way we do it.

I know it's easier said than done because when your in situations you feel a lot of pressure yourself, you're bombarded with different views, but we've got to remember that we need that information, we need that person to come in.

Otherwise we're going to have as we automate everything, people can't think for themselves.

So trust your people, trust them that they will do the right thing. Don't think they want something or they're not smart enough or not capable enough, trust them to do the right thing this way. They will trust each other.

I think too, the owning up to mistakes, we have to acknowledge that sometimes people hesitate to do that because they don't want you as the manager to personally think less of them because they've made them. They're worried about their reputation in your eyes personally. Not professionally necessarily. And so we need as managers to practice our reactions to that because naturally enough, it's a bit like cutting your finger and you know you shouldn't do it and you know you've done it before and you know it will get better. All those things with the initial reaction is you're irritated and you're angry that it's happened, it's happened again. But you don't focus on the cut. Because if you focused on the cut and how much you're bleeding, you bleed to death. What you focus on is fixing. It is stopping the bleeding, it is covering it up so that it can heal.

That's an analogy that I use when people do come to me and say, look, I've done this, I don't think this has worked. And I have a box of band aids that sits on the desk and I just pick it up and I say, well, what are we going to do? What's the band aid for this? How are we going to fix it? How are we gonna make it heal? And that helps me. It's trite. But it helps me not have the automatic reaction which involves a problem. Instead I can look at the band aids and I can say okay, it's band aid

time.

What are we going to do? And it moves me away from the immediate reaction, which is unnecessary because the person is already distressed and upset that the mistake has happened and they don't need anything added to that. So I get a safe environment. I have the band aids and I just say Band Aid time. What are we going to do?

By doing it that way too, just guess what they're gonna make? They might be, you know, not in a supervisory position, but they will be and guess what? They'll make good leaders because they learn through their own experience how it felt to make a mistake, how it felt when they came to you and how it felt when they solved it. That would be a very, very good thing when they are in a leadership position and they help others..

We've probably covered the topic enough. But what I would like to hear from those of you listening is what solutions do you use when the mistakes appear? What is it that makes your work environment safe for people to come and tell you? Because it's an area where we've talked quite a number of times about in all sorts of different ways and it's obviously an area that is still interesting to all of you out there.

So if you've got some more suggestions about how people make or how you make your work environment safe, we'd love to hear those and we'll share them in a future podcast. But for now, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec.